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More than 500 Soviet-bloc envoys and employes may be spies

Soviet U.N. delegates confer on day of U.S. expulsion order

Moscow's hidden assets at the United Nations

■ A former ambassador from a Third World nation remembers them well—the Soviet-bloc employes who brought two overcoats to their United Nations offices, one to hang on the rack when they arrived in the morning, one to wear when they went out to spy. Such stories illustrate the problem: The 25 suspected KGB agents that the U.S. has ordered expelled from the U.S.S.R. mission are but a drop in a brimming bucket of espionage at the U.N.

Left in place: Hundreds more Soviet employes—typists, technicians, diplomats and others—"known or suspected" by the FBI to be full-time espionage operatives. Their assignment is to gather intelligence and recruit Americans and foreign nationals to spy. "New York is the hotbed of spying in the United States," says a high U.S. intelligence official. "Unlike in Washington or San Francisco, every country has a large presence at the U.N. It's easy to blend in and cultivate a target."

Secretariat of spies?

Along with the recent spy arrest of Gennadi Zakharov, the expulsion move is part of a harder U.S. line against U.N.-based Soviet espionage—which has vexed the FBI since the U.N.'s founding. "We began this chain of events 30 years ago when we started letting the Soviets fill up the U.N. Secretariat with spies in direct violation of the U.N. Charter," laments Senator Daniel Moynihan (D-N.Y.), a former U.N. ambassador. In all, the Soviet Union, Cuba and Eastern European states have about 1,500 people at the U.N. The FBI believes at least one third are spies. The Kremlin alone has 275 people assigned to its U.N. mission and 305 working for the U.N. itself.

In March, the U.S. declared that the Soviet mission had grown too large and posed "a threat to U.S. national security." It is twice the size of the U.S. mission and surpasses those of the United States and China combined. The administration ordered the Soviets to trim the staff to 170 by April 1, 1988, in six-month increments of 25. Last week, the State Department came up with its own list of 25 to be expelled October 1, described by a senior White House aide as the top KGB agents in New York.

That the Soviet Union and its allies use the U.N. as an espionage cover may be the worst-kept secret in New York. Former U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Charles Lichenstein recalls receiving reports that Soviet employes routinely disappeared for 5 or 6 hours at a time and "never seemed to be engaged in any U.N. business. . . . Nobody questioned that a substantial number of Soviets were engaged in espionage."

A CIA source tells of operatives using reversible raincoats, false mustaches and dark glasses—the whole Hollywood shtick—on their intelligence rounds.

"Vacuum-cleaner operation"

Much of the Soviets' work at the U.N. involves collecting sensitive information from public records, journals and reports as well as spy recruitment. "They run a vacuum-cleaner operation, sucking up everything," declares John Martin, chief of internal security at the Justice Department. "They want to know about the latest aircraft, Stealth technology, the space shuttle. They can't survive without stealing our trade, military, scientific and technological secrets."

Under the best of circumstances, it's nearly impossible for the FBI to keep tabs on the spooks of Turtle Bay. Full 24-hour surveillance of one person takes 8 to 11 security officers, intelligence experts report. Nationwide, the FBI has no more than 1,500 agents assigned to counterespionage—1 for every 2 or 3 suspects. "We're outmanned and outgunned," says one official. Even when Soviet spies are caught, they are seldom tried. Those with diplomatic immunity can only be kicked out of the country.

The FBI is pouring more resources into the fight. Since 1982, it has increased counterintelligence outlays by 25 percent. The payoff is just beginning. The last two years have seen 25 spy prosecutions and only one acquittal. Still, the bureau doesn't know exactly how big a dent it is putting in the Soviet spy network in this country. "An optimist would say we catch 50 percent, a pessimist 2 percent," says Justice's Martin. "The answer is probably in between—but whatever it is, it's a pretty dismal picture." ■

Security Council session. A lot more is going on than speechmaking

by Jeffery L. Sheler with Ted Gest, Charles Fenyvesi and Steven Emerson